

THE SICK MAN LEFT BEHIND

NO. 1452A

A SHORT SERMON
FROM THE SICK ROOM OF C. H. SPURGEON.

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“But Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.”
2 Timothy 4:20.

THESE are among the last words of Paul the apostle, for we find them in the closing verses of the last of his epistles. The chapter reminds us of a dying man's final adieu to his best friend, in the course of which he calls to mind the associates of his life. Among his memories of love, we find Paul recollecting Trophimus who had frequently shared with him the perils of rivers and perils of robbers which so largely attended the apostle's career. He had left the good man ill at Miletum and as Timothy at Ephesus was within an easy journey of him, there was no need to add a hint that he should visit him, for he would be sure to do it. The love of Jesus works great tenderness and unity in the hearts of His disciples. The overflow of our Lord's great soul has saturated all His true followers with brotherly affection—because Jesus has loved Paul, Paul loves Timothy, and Timothy must love Trophimus. From this love there arises communion of feeling so that in sympathy they share each other's joys and griefs. When one member rejoices, the body rejoices—and when one member suffers the whole body suffers with it. Trophimus is sick and Paul cannot forget him, though he himself expects in a few weeks to die a martyr's death. Neither would he have Timothy ignorant of the fact, though twice within a few verses he hurries him to come to Rome, saying, “Do your diligence to come shortly unto me.” If Timothy could not personally visit the sick friend, yet it was well that he should know of his affliction, for he would then remember him in his prayers. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.” Let us remember those who are one with us in Christ and especially let us bear on our hearts all those who are afflicted in mind, body, or estate. If we have had to leave Trophimus at Miletum, or at Brighton, or at Ventnor, let us leave our heart's love with him. And if we hear that another Trophimus lies sick not far from our own home, let us accept the information as in itself a sufficient summons to minister to the afflicted friend. May holy sympathy pervade all our souls, for however active and zealous we may be, we have not yet reached a perfect character unless we are full of compassion, tender-hearted, and considerate of the sorrowful, for this is the mind of Christ.

Simple as the statement of our text certainly is, it is found in an inspired book and it is, therefore, more than an ordinary note in a common letter. Like another verse of the same chapter, “The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, when you come, bring with you and the books, but especially the parchments,” has been judged to be beneath the dignity of inspiration, but we think not so. The God who counts the hairs of our heads in providence may well mention His sick servant on the pages of inspiration. Instead of quibbling at the littleness of the recorded fact, let us admire “the love of the Spirit” who, while He lifts Ezekiel and Daniel above the spheres and raises the language of David and Isaiah to the utmost pitch of poetry and eloquence, yet deigns to breathe in such a line as this—“*Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.*” Can we learn anything more from this plain line of apostolic penmanship? Let us see. If the same divine Spirit who inspired it will shine upon it, we shall not read it in vain.

I. From the fact that Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletum we learn that IT IS THE WILL OF GOD THAT SOME GOOD MEN SHOULD BE IN ILL HEALTH. Whatever the malady may have been which affected Trophimus, Paul could certainly have healed him if the divine Spirit had permitted the use of his miraculous powers to that end. He had raised up Eutychus from death and he had given back the use of his limbs to the cripple at Lystra. We feel, therefore, fully assured that had God allowed the apostle so to use his healing energy, Trophimus would have left his bed and continued his journey to Rome. Not so, however, had the Lord willed. The good fruit-bearing vine must be pruned and Trophimus must suffer—there were ends to be answered by his weakness which could not be compassed by his health. Instantaneous restoration could have been given, but it was withheld under divine direction.

This doctrine *leads us away from the vain idea of chance*. We are not wounded by arrows shot at a venture, but we smart by the determinate counsel of heaven. An overruling hand is everywhere present, preventing or permitting ill and no one shaft of disease is ever let fly by stealth from the bow of death. If someone must be ill, it was a wise providence which selected Trophimus, for it was better for him to be ill than Titus, or Tychicus, or Timothy. It was well, too, that he happened to be ill at Miletum near to his own native city Ephesus. We cannot always see the hand of God in providence, but we may always be sure that it is there. If not a sparrow lights on the ground without our Father, surely not a child of the divine family is laid low without His sacred will. Chance is a heathenish idea which cannot live in the presence of an everywhere present, living, and working God. Away with it from every Christian mind! It is alike dishonoring to the Lord and grievous to ourselves.

This also delivers us from regarding affliction as being always brought upon men by their personal sin. Many a sickness has been the direct result of intemperance or some other form of wickedness—but here is a worthy, well-approved brother laid aside and left on the road through a malady for which he is not blamed in any measure. It is too common nowadays for men to be of a hard and cruel spirit and ascribe the illnesses even of those who are true children of God to some fault in their habits of life. We wonder how they would like to be dealt with in this manner if they were suffering and could wash their hands in innocence in reference to their daily lives? In our Lord's Day they told Him, "Lord, he whom You love is sick." And Solomon, long before that time wrote, "Whom the Lord loves He corrects; even as a father the son in whom he delights." This was a much better, more humane, and more truthful speech than the frozen philosophy of modern times which traces each man's sickness to his own violation of natural law and instead of pouring in the balm of consolation, pours out the sulfuric acid of slanderous insinuation. Let the afflicted examine himself to see if the rod is not sent to correct some secret evil and let him diligently consider where he may amend—but far be it from us to stand at his bedside like judges or lictors and look upon our friend as an offender as well as a sufferer. Such brutality may be left to the philosophers, but it would ill become the sons of God. We may not think a shade the less of Trophimus because he is sick at Miletum. He is probably a far better man than any of us and perhaps for that very reason he is more tried. There is gold in him which pays for putting into the crucible—he bears such rich fruit that he is worth pruning—he is a diamond of so pure water that he will repay the lapidary's toil. This may not be quite so true of any of us and therefore we escape his sharper trials. Let us, as James says, "Count them happy that endure," and like David say, "Blessed is the man whom You chasten, O Lord, and teach him out of Your law." What do the Scriptures say?—"For whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chastens not?" Lazarus of Bethany, Dorcas, Epaphroditus, and Trophimus are a few of that great host of sick folk whom the Lord loves in their sicknesses, for whom the promise was written, "The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: You will make all his bed in his sickness."

II. We have only strength and space for mere hints and so we notice, secondly, that GOOD MEN MAY BE LAID ASIDE WHEN THEY SEEM TO BE MOST NEEDED—as Trophimus was when the aged apostle had but a scanty escort and required his aid. Paul needed him badly enough soon after he had been obliged to leave him at Miletum, for he writes sorrowfully, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.” “And Tychicus have I sent to Ephesus.” How glad he would have been with Trophimus, for we see how he begs Timothy to come with all speed and to bring Mark, whose service he greatly needed with him. Yet not even for Paul’s sake can Trophimus be suddenly raised up. His Lord sees it to be necessary that he should feel the heat of the furnace and into the crucible he must go. We think that the church cannot spare the earnest minister, the indefatigable missionary, the faithful deacon, the tender teacher—but God thinks not so. No one is indispensable in the household of God. He can do His own work not only without Trophimus, but even without Paul. Yes, we go further—it sometimes happens that the work of the Lord is quickened by the decease of one upon whom it seemed to depend. When a broad, far-spreading tree is cut down, many smaller trees which were dwarfed and stunted while it stood, suddenly shoot up into vigorous growth—even so, one good man may do much and yet, when he is removed, others may do more. Temporary illnesses of great workers may call to the front those who would otherwise, from modesty, have remained in the rear—and the result may be a great gain.

Poor Trophimus had, in his healthier days, been the innocent cause of bringing Paul into a world of trouble, for we read in Acts 21:27 that a tumult was made by the Jews because they imagined that Paul had brought Trophimus into the temple and so had defiled it. Now, when he could have been of service, he is sick and no doubt it was a great grief to him that it should be so. Yet for him, as oftentimes for us, there was no alternative but to submit himself under the hand of God and feel that the Lord is always right. Why do we not yield at once? Why do we chomp the bit and paw the ground, restless to be on the road? If our Lord bids us stand still, can we not be quiet? Active spirits are apt to become restive spirits when under the restraining hand—energy soon sours into rebellion and we quarrel with God because we are not allowed to glorify Him in our own way—a foolish form of contest which at bottom means that we have a will of our own and will only serve God upon condition of having it indulged. Brethren, he who writes these lines knows what he writes and this is the verdict of his experience—God’s work needs us far less than we imagine and God would have us aware of this fact, for He will not give His glory to human instruments any more than He will allow His praise to be bestowed on graven images.

III. Our text clearly shows us that GOOD MEN WOULD HAVE THE LORD’S WORK GO ON WHATEVER BECOMES OF THEM.

Paul did not desert Trophimus, but left him, because a higher call summoned him to Rome. Trophimus, we may be sure, did not wish to delay the great apostle, but was content to be left. No doubt they both felt the separation, but like true soldiers of Christ, they endured hardness and for the sake of the cause, parted company for a while.

It would be a great grief to a true-hearted worker if he knew that any fellow-laborer slackened his pace for his sake. The sick in an army of an earthly monarch are necessarily an impediment, but it need not be so in the army of the King of kings. Spiritual sickness is a sore hindrance, but sickness of body should not delay the host. If we cannot preach, we can pray. If one work is out of our reach, we can try another and if we can do nothing, our inability should serve as a call to the vigorous to be doing all the more. Trophimus is sick, then let Timothy be the more energetic. Trophimus cannot attend the apostle, then let Timothy be the more diligent to come before winter. Thus, by acting as an incentive, the lack of one man’s service may produce tenfold more in others who are awakened to extra exertions.

Brethren, it will be the sweetest alleviation to the pains of a sick pastor if he sees you each and all nerved to special diligence. His enforced rest will be the better enjoyed if he knows that the Church of God is not a sufferer because of it. And his whole mind and spirit will minister to the health of his body if he sees the fruit of the Spirit of God in all of you, keeping you faithful and zealous. Will you not see to this for Jesus' sake?

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